

The call for chaplains



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Diane Brantley, 39, of Sarasota wants to become a chaplain. "If I didn't have a family, I would already have done it." As she tries to decide, the Florida Army National Guard searches for chaplains who can fulfill tough requirements — and go to war.



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Col. Jim Fogle-Miller, the Guard's current state chaplain, counsels others who have returned from Afghanistan.

Recruiters for the Florida Guard seek those who'll be armed only with faith.

BY BRADY DENNIS
Times Staff Writer

Chaplain Maj. Glenn Finch has put a beating on his 2004 silver Nissan Maxima during the past year: 55,000 miles, countless hours on the road, barely a day off.

He has traveled to every corner of the state from his home base in St. Augustine to recruit chaplains for the Florida Army National Guard.

He has visited seminars, ministers associations and megachurches. He has searched as far as New Orleans.

"We're really hurting," Finch, 41, said recently.

Florida's Guard has space for 20 chaplains. Nine now cover the entire state. By spring, because of retirements and transfers, that number will fall to seven, leaving the Guard at 35 percent of full strength.

Similar shortages have played out across the country. Nationwide, the Army National Guard has authorization for 767 chaplains. Nearly half those spots remain vacant.

The Army Reserves haven't fared much better. Of 639 chaplain positions, more than a third sit unfilled.

While the number of chaplains lags, the needs of soldiers and their families never cease.

Years ago, Guard officials in Florida had to turn away chaplain candidates.

"We were 100 percent strength," said Col. Jim Fogle-Miller, 56, the Guard's current state chaplain. "The biggest problem was saying no to all the people moving to Florida who wanted to transfer in."

"That would be a nice problem to have. We don't have that
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» BY THE NUMBERS

Nationwide shortage of Army chaplains

Active duty positions: 1,446	Vacancies: 90
National Guard positions: 767	Vacancies: 325
Reserves positions: 639	Vacancies: 225

Source: Army Chief of Chaplains Office

Overseas duty almost certain

problem."

The current shortage defies simple explanation.

Neither the Navy nor the Air Force, which employ far fewer chaplains than the Army, have encountered such shortages.

Ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan certainly haven't helped recruiting. In quieter years, Guard chaplains could feel reasonably sure they wouldn't have to leave their home flocks. Now, they are all but guaranteed an overseas deployment.

Also, people entering the clergy these days often do so as a second career. That means many already have passed the age limit of 42 for new chaplains.

On top of that, new candidates must meet tough standards. It takes a master's degree in divinity or a graduate degree in theological studies. Candidates must be U.S. citizens, must pass a military fitness test and criminal background checks.

They also must have an ecclesiastical endorsement. They cannot have exorbitant debt or recent bankruptcies.

"They basically have to have character and integrity," Finch said. "You think that'd be a no-brainer, but you'd be surprised."

For those who pass the scrutiny, a trying and sometimes dangerous job awaits.

At home, chaplains help military families through an array of problems. They counsel them on domestic issues. They pre-

pare them for long deployments and the challenges of homecomings. They work on improving communication skills.

When a soldier dies, a chaplain always comes along for the dreaded knock on the door.

Overseas, chaplains minister to soldiers, listen to their problems, pray with them. They hold memorial services when someone dies in combat, and they help others in the unit deal with their grief. They do all this, unarmed, in a combat zone.

Asked what a new chaplain must be prepared for, Finch laughed: "Just about anything."

Putting out fires

Here's a sampling of the Florida Guard's current vacancies: South Florida, Orlando, Lakeland, St. Petersburg and all of the Panhandle, from Pensacola to Jacksonville.

The Guard's few chaplains must cover lots of real estate and often end up stretched thin.

"It moves us from more of a proactive force to a reactive one," Fogle-Miller said.

"You find yourself providing ministry to treat crises rather than to prevent them."

The shortage means asking chaplains to look out for more than only the members in their unit. It also can mean leaning on other states for help.

Last year, when a special forces unit from Jacksonville prepared to leave for Iraq, the soldiers had no chaplain.

The military generally refuses to send troops into battle

without one.

So the Florida Guard borrowed a chaplain from Georgia and sent the unit on its way.

"Those are the types of arrangements we make all the time," Finch said. "We have no other choice."

The Army has given recruiters more tools than ever to entice new prospects.

Within the past year, it instituted a \$10,000 bonus for new chaplains. Candidates also can qualify for thousands more to pay back student loans, and the Army helps pay for years of schooling to educate recruits who have little experience in the ministry.

"It takes a while to grow a chaplain," said Chaplain Col. Richard Pace, personnel director for the Army Chief of Chaplains.

Fogle-Miller also pitches the possibility of deployment as a positive rather than a deterrent.

Being a chaplain during wartime, he says, is more exciting and meaningful.

"Why would someone want to be a chaplain and serve in such a difficult time? Precisely *because* it's difficult," said Fogle-Miller, who returned from Afghanistan earlier this year.

"The moments you connect most strongly with people are in the most difficult moments. And that's what you've got all the time in a combat zone. To be able to provide ministry under those circumstances is a privilege and a blessing."

The leap of faith

Many prospective chaplains face a gut-wrenching dilemma between duty and family.

Diane Brantley, a 39-year-old licensed clinical social worker in Sarasota, wants to become a chaplain. But she has two young children at home and a husband who hasn't warmed to the idea.

"He doesn't like the word 'deployed,'" Brantley said. "He isn't ready for that."

"If I didn't have a family, I would already have done it. But I know at the same time that I have to value my family."

While Brantley wrestles with whether to sign up, another recruit in nearby Bradenton seems ready to take the leap.

"I definitely feel called to do it," said 37-year-old John Osborne, a married father of two and a project manager for a civil engineering firm. "There's a need to be met."

In January, he will begin working toward a master's of divinity. It will take years before Osborne becomes a chaplain, but he's intent on getting there.

"It's a lot to take on," he said, but "I feel very strongly about it. As a Christian, you're called to serve."

That's good news for Glenn Finch. But he knows many more miles in the Nissan lie ahead.

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